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ABSTRACT

Students in college basic skills programs will become more proficient writers not simply by being taught specific writing strategies, but also by greater exposure to the total linguistic system through reading. In the first of two reading projects initiated in an Ohio State University basic skills program, eight students participated voluntarily in weekly two-hour sustained silent reading sessions and kept journals of their reading responses. Although the students had great difficulty selecting appropriate texts, two students eventually found appropriate books and increased their reading comprehension scores dramatically during the ten-week project. In the second project, students were required to spend one hour per week in a reading laboratory, reading from a programed text and answering questions about their reading. The results of this project were encouraging, especially the gains made in reading comprehension skills. Neither project was designed to measure improvement in writing skills; but in any case, the benefits derived from sustained silent reading involve a familiarity with linguistic structures, and reading should not be expected to affect writing directly. There is a need for reading programs for basic writers and for research into the relationship between reading and writing. David Bartholomae's research in this area suggests that work in reading affects basic writers' performance in writing. (GT)

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Reading Theory and the Basic Writer

Basic skills programs often concentrate on writing and either ignore or neglect reading. Frequently they provide students who are underprepared for college an opportunity to develop writing skills but not reading skills. No doubt one reason is that deficiency in writing is visible whereas deficiency in reading is invisible. If students cannot write they are a potential embarrassment, but if they cannot read, the problem will not be as readily detected. And so we treat the symptom; we teach writing. I would like to argue, however, that in neglecting reading we are ignoring one of the best ways of improving writing. Basic writers will become more proficient writers not simply by being taught specific writing strategies, but also by greater exposure to the total linguistic system through reading. As Julie Falk says in her essay, "Language Acquisition and the Teaching and Learning of Writing," recently published in College English, (41, 436-447), "Long exposure to the writing of others prior to the production of one's own writing provides the learner with examples and, ultimately, with an understanding of the nature and the structure of written English. By the time they reach high school and college, we expect our students to know how to read, but for writing, it is crucially important that they do read. The best practical preparation for learning to write is to read" (p. 438).

I would like to describe two reading projects I initiated last year at Ohio State's Writing Workshop, a basic skills program designed to prepare basic writers for the regular freshman course. The projects were first gropings toward what I hope will become a reading program at the Workshop. I am describing them not because I hope others will imitate them, but because they suggest directions reading programs might take. The results of both convinced

me that students develop as readers primarily by reading silently to themselves, making their own adjustments to the exigencies of the material and developing appropriate strategies as they proceed through the text. They convinced me, in other words, of the validity of the major tenets of psycholinguistic reading theory.

I should explain that the two projects were very much affected by the constraints of the Workshop budget. Although I was hired, in part, to develop a reading program, five sixths of my job responsibilities involved teaching writing and one sixth involved helping coordinate the writing program, administering reading tests, and initiating reading projects. In other words, although the director of the Workshop was very much aware of the need for the development of a reading program and was very encouraging, the financial support for such development was negligible. And so I worked on one project during my lunch hour and delegated much of the administrative duties for the other project to teaching assistants.

The first project involved approximately eight students from my writing classes who volunteered to spend time working on their reading. We met two hours a week (at lunch time); students were asked to select a book (not a magazine) and to engage in what psycholinguistic reading theorists call "sustained silent reading"--reading silently to themselves. Students were not tested on their reading but were asked, instead, to keep a journal of their responses. My aim in setting up the reading situation in this way was to test the assumptions upon which sustained silent reading is founded, namely: that the reader takes an active role in the reading process, bringing to bear her/his prior experience in the reading of a text; that the reader reads to identify meaning and subordinates all other aspects of the decoding process to this goal; that the reader shifts strategies depending upon her or his purpose or upon the nature of the materials. I wanted to determine if reading

theorists are correct when they assert that people learn to read by reading.

But--of course--it is not quite this simple. Reading theorists stress that reading abilities will develop only if students read appropriate materials. If materials are too difficult or too easy, no learning will result. My students had enormous difficulty selecting appropriate texts. Most selected books which were too difficult and sat with them contentedly for several sessions, apparently unaware that they were not actually processing what they were reading. I am convinced that what we call "invention" in writing has its equivalent in reading. Before students can become engaged in a work they must "discover" a topic that interests them, and this often involves strategies similar to invention strategies in writing--brainstorming, making lists, writing in a journal. I must admit that a number of the students never did discover the appropriate text. They sat for a few weeks with a book but eventually lost interest in it and in the project--which, after all, offered no extrinsic reward such as extra credit or a higher grade--and decided, I suppose, that what they really needed was a proper lunch hour. I did have two success stories, however, and they convinced me of the value of the approach.

One student spent several weeks at the beginning of the quarter searching for a book; when he finally found one--a discussion of marijuana--he became involved in it and attended the sessions quite regularly. At the beginning of the qurter he achieved a grade equivalent of 10.7 in comprehension as measured by the Nelson-Denny reading test; the score he achieved at the end of the quarter was considerably higher, however. His post-test indicated that his grade equivalent was 13.3, a gain of more than two and a half grade levels in only ten weeks. A second student made equivalent gains. She, too, had great difficulty locating a book. She was sure she wanted to read about psychoanalysis, an interest she had developed in high school, and latched on to the first book she found on the subject--a discussion of Freud's theories of art clearly aimed at graduate students. This she sat with for over a week,

clearly doing more staring than reading. After I convinced her she might do better with an easier book (it took some convincing), she selected a much more elementary and much more suitable introduction to psychoanalysis and became engrossed in it. Her pre-test on the Nelson-Denny indicated that she read on the grade level of a junior high student--7.5 in comprehension. Her post-test comprehension score indicated, however, that she, too, had made gains of approximately two and a half years in only ten weeks.

I was well aware that two success stories were hardly sufficient evidence to convince a resistant administration that we needed more financial support. Encouraged by the success of these two students, therefore, I embarked upon a somewhat more ambitious project. I decided to simplify matters by eliminating the very difficult problem of selecting materials by employing a programmed text designed for students who read on the 9th-11th grade level--appropriate but also challenging for most of our students, many of whom read on or below ninth grade level. I also decided to eliminate the high attrition problem of the earlier project by making participation in the project mandatory for students in selected sections of our writing courses. Approximately thirty-five students were told that 10% of their grade would be based upon their attendance in a Reading Laboratory where they would spend one hour per week reading from the programmed text, answering questions about their reading, and checking their answers. Students read selections at their own pace in a very low-pressure environment; they realized that they would be graded solely upon attendance in the lab and not upon the scores they achieved on the comprehension questions. The testing instruments used were the Nelson-Denny reading test and the Cloze test, a test in which every n^{th} word is deleted and is then completed or given closure by the student.

The results of the experiment were encouraging, especially the gains made in comprehension skills. Of the twenty-four students for whom we had pre and post scores on the Nelson-Denny test, fifteen increased their comprehension

scores; the mean increase in comprehension was one grade level, an impressive figure considering that students spent an average of only 7.3 class periods in the lab. This increase is even more impressive when compared with the insignificant gains made by students who did not attend Lab sessions. Of 331 Workshop students for whom we had Nelson-Denny pre and post scores, the mean increase in comprehension was only 0.2 or the equivalent of two months. The Cloze test scores were equally encouraging, suggesting that the majority of students who were involved in the experiment did develop efficient reading strategies during the ten week period. Of the eighteen students for whom we had pre and post Cloze scores, nine made gains, seven remained the same, and only two lost ground. Of the seven who remained the same, five had originally attained the highest score possible (four) and so it was impossible to measure their progress. If we assume that they also made gains, then it is likely that fourteen out of the eighteen students made gains in reading fluency. The mean increase of 0.5 on the Cloze test is the equivalent of an entire grade level. Only seven students were reading on an adult level (as measured by the Cloze test) at the beginning of the quarter, but thirteen were reading on an adult level by the end of the quarter.

I have no empirical evidence to substantiate my suspicion that the students involved in both projects also made gains in writing. Unfortunately, neither project was designed to measure improvement in writing skills. I do know that the two students described in connection with the first project did make progress in writing skills--both were in my writing classes and both were among the strongest writers in their respective classes by the end of the quarter. But even if I had measured for writing improvement, I am not sure the results would have been conclusive. The benefits students derive from sustained silent reading are long-range and indirect rather than immediate and direct. No one essay or book will have a direct effect upon the writing of a single paper. I do not subscribe to the "imitation" theory of writing which assumes that

writing will improve if students are given models written by professional writers of the type of writing they have been asked to generate. What sustained silent reading accomplishes is to familiarize students with linguistic structures, in their many varieties, and to allow them to develop reading strategies which are appropriate in particular reading situations. Readers internalize forms and strategies when they read, and the internalization process results in language development. James Britton, in discussing the relationship between writing and reading, says, "A good deal used to be taken for granted about direct relationships between what children were made to read and what they ought therefore to be able to write. We are beginning to discover, however, that no matter how much we help, children need to find their own ways of processing ideas and information and feelings, and that they differ enormously in how they do it" (The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), London: Schools Council Publications, 1975, p. 43). Students will find their own ways of processing ideas, and information, and feelings if they are given the freedom to read in a non-threatening atmosphere at their own pace.

This paper is really a call, then, for the development of reading programs for basic writers and for research into the nature of the relationship between reading and writing. Programs and research, of course, are intimately connected: reading programs should spawn research, and research should convince resistant administrators to fund programs. I am happy to report that this Fall Quarter, Ohio State's Writing Workshop received funding for a full-blown pilot project in reading. Three sections of Workshop students (approximately 45) were enrolled in a five hour course emphasizing both reading and writing skills. A control group of three sections of students, also enrolled in a five hour course, did very little work in reading during the quarter. Activities of students in the experimental group included sustained silent reading and group discussion of selected essays. Data from the experiment will be analyzed this spring.

I suggest as a valuable resource in initiating reading courses in basic skills programs David Bartholomae's description of a reading project he initiated at the University of Pittsburgh. In his article, "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," published in the Spring/Summer issue of the Journal of Basic Writing, Bartholomae describes a six hour course entitled "Basic Reading and Writing," which employed the method of "sustained silent reading" and which encouraged interaction between reader and text through the use of journals and also summaries, comparisons with earlier reading, or analyses of texts.

Bartholomae's research, which has greatly influenced my own research, is encouraging because it suggest that work in reading affects performance in writing. Although his students' comprehension scores, as measured by the Nelson-Denny Reading test, did not improve, he did identify gains in a standardized test of writing abilities, and also gains in a holistic assessment of writing as well as reduction of writing anxiety as measured by the Daly-Miller test.

Basic writers are ready to read. Almost all are eager to "converse" with a writer in order to make sense of their environment and to reduce their anxiety about their relationship to that environment. What reading theorists remind us is that the best way to encourage students to read meaningfully is to help them locate texts which will fulfill their needs and then to create a supportive atmosphere in which they can read at their own pace in their own way. If we can engage basic writers in the process of reading, then we will have given them a nudge toward the achievement of selfhood.